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The History of the Passport

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Driving to the U.S. with my parents, I was 13 or 14, asleep in the back seat. The customs officer opened my door and put her face in front of mine. "Wake up," she said. "You're not a kid anymore. Show some respect when you're crossing the border." I might have imagined *show some respect.*

"For respect" is what the photographer said at the passport studio when he draped a neon-pink scarf around my shoulders to conceal my bra straps. The studio was offering a free portrait session with purchase of a passport photo—or maybe this photographer was just bored. He posed me in uncomfortable leans for twenty minutes, pulling worn teddy bears and dusty books and fake bouquets out of an ornate trunk for me to hold. I giggled out of embarrassment. "What's so funny?" he kept asking. I had no answer: why did it feel different to be photographed for a passport than for no reason at all? Looking at the finished photos made me even more uncomfortable: my bra straps, with the teddy bear, gave the impression of a grown woman who hadn't realized she was no longer a child.

The State Department recommends applying for a new passport if your appearance differs significantly from your passport photo. *Weight loss or gain, numerous/large facial piercings or tattoos, facial surgery or trauma* and *gender transition* are listed as good reasons to reapply. *The normal aging process* is not a reason.

I don't think that my passport photo looks very much like me.

Recently, a distant acquaintance announced online that he'd gotten a face tattoo. *About to do something really stupid...* he'd posted several days earlier. Then, a picture appeared of his face with loud tribal stretching from nose to ears. "It's especially sad because he had such a *beautiful* face," said one friend. "It's, like, *disrespectful* of his own beauty." I tried to imagine the state of mind I would need to be in to get a face tattoo. Directionless anger that

could be expressed no other way? A desperate desire for individuality? What could I ever have to say that would be true enough to post on my face?

My father once told me that I would never be able to see exactly what I looked like to other people; mirrors would always show me the backwards image of myself. Throughout my childhood, this idea frustrated me: the impossibility of seeing my face in any non-approximate way. Now, I prefer it this way; I am only backwards-sure of anything about myself.

Is my passport book fiction or non-fiction?

It turned out that the face tattoo was fake, an experiment for *Vice*. "Not a single person gave me a good reason why I shouldn't have one," he wrote in an article about his week with a face tattoo.

Since 2007, American passports have embedded chips with duplicate copies of the information printed in the booklet. This allows border agents to use facial recognition technology to compare the person against their digital photo. International visa-holders have had to supply fingerprints for years each time they cross into the U.S., and retinal scans are becoming common. The passport book is no longer being read—it is the body that is read. Mary Douglas writes in *Purity and Danger*: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system." National borders are being mapped onto bodily ones.

I was born in Canada and inherited my ability to get a U.S. passport from my father. He grew up in Watonga, Oklahoma, where he had a two-digit phone number. He was supporting himself playing music by the time he was 18 years old, and during Vietnam, he joined the Air Force band to avoid the draft. "So that I wouldn't have to move to Canada—now look where I am!" he jokes. As a touring musician, he has been to every state and prob-

ably visited more countries than not. The music group he performs with is called Nexus. "Nexus has its own frequent traveler card now," my father Tweeted. "Just saved me 45 minutes at customs in Toronto airport." The Nexus program allows frequent, pre-cleared travelers to be fast-tracked through customs entering Canada and the U.S. He had been worried that he wouldn't qualify for the program, since it depended on a retinal scan. The previous summer, he was hit in the eye with a tennis ball and the steroids he'd taken made one pupil stay permanently dilated. In the end, it was not a problem; apparently, the eye-reading machines can parse dilation just fine.

For every holiday while I was at university, my father drove 9 hours to pick me up at university in the United States, and 9 hours home to Canada. "It would be cheaper for me just to fly," I said once, at yet another gas station. "I don't mind," he said, or maybe "It's my job." Sometimes, I cried silently in the car, thinking about the new American friends I already missed, or worrying that I would never care about anyone enough to drive 18 hours in two days just to bring them home.

At home, people surprised me by the questions they chose to ask about my experiences at college. "That was very brave of you, to move to another country all alone," they sometimes said. I don't know the right word to describe it—exciting? Inevitable? Not brave. "What made you decide to apply to American schools?" No American has ever asked me this question. If somebody is asking this question, they are the type of person who does not want to hear the only truthful answer, which is that they're better than the Canadian ones.

I interviewed applicants from Toronto who applied to my alma mater. At my own interview a decade ago, the man—an intimidating lawyer in a full suit—told me, "You'll go there, and then you're going to come back to Canada." It was the only thing I

remembered from the interview. "The idea is that you bring everything you've learned with you back home." I found out later that he had broken all the rules: he pulled me out of school, came to my house, allowed my parents to sit in—all things explicitly advised against in the alumni interviewers handbook. I rephrased his words as a question to the applicants I met: "How do you feel about moving to the United States? How do your friends and family feel about the idea of you moving there?" It took them all by surprise; ready with thoughtful, articulate responses to my questions about their academics, extracurriculars, interests, they had not prepared an answer to this one.

A month into my freshman year, a journalist for the school newspaper interviewed me for an article about Canadians on campus. I hadn't thought deeply about the transition—it was still happening—and provided a cryptic sound bite, probably the least inarticulate quote she was able to pull from our conversation: "Any kind of change of environment for anyone makes you realize how much the place you were before affected who you are, and makes you recognize certain things specific to that place."

When you apply for a passport renewal, you can check a box if you'd like to keep the expired copy as a memento. There are two types of people in America: those who check the box and those who don't.

My coworkers from China explain that the process of obtaining a passport there is not straightforward. People are denied for all types of reasons. Friends and family are interviewed as if it's secret security clearance. One woman was asked to repay over $100,000 in scholarships she'd received for her Chinese education, because the passport meant that she was moving away to work and the country was losing its investment in her.

A passport is a keepsake from home, so that you don't forget about it when you travel.

While living in the U.S., I filled out the census, and noticed that my roommate checked the "Other" box for ethnicity, writing in "Iranian-American." I was tempted to write in "Canadian-American," but the temptation was not strong enough to actually do it. This lack of pull is probably what characterizes me most as a Canadian-American.

The United States is one of the few countries that allow the renunciation of citizenship even to people who hold no other passport. An in-person interview is required, where agents are told to advise such prospective renouncers that they may find it extremely difficult to travel in the future, among other challenges that come with statelessness. There has been a rise in recent years of people giving up their citizenship: primarily, however, among the wealthy who do not want to pay double the tax.

As a child, I had a babysitter from Australia who gave up her passport for a Canadian one, as Australia did not accept dual citizens. "My parents can never find out," she had said. I felt an incredible sense of despair, both for the loss of her passport and for the secrecy. She did not appear to share my feelings. "Never let your passport expire," my father has told me countless times.

An astronaut goes through customs:

Border Control: What was the purpose of your trip?

Astronaut: To pioneer the future of exploration, expand frontiers, things like that.

BC: Are you bringing back any food?

A: I wouldn't call it food.

BC: Did you make any purchases while abroad?

A: I picked up some moon rocks, but I didn't pay for them.

BC: Did you come into contact with livestock or other exotic plants or animals?

A: I don't think so, but that's the big question, isn't it?
BC: How long were you away?
A: Just two weeks, but I saw the sun set over 200 times.

At the border: first, a reading of the passport; second, a conversation about the story. My father's advice for border crossing: "Give them as little information as possible." He has given me iterations of this same advice many times over the years. I asked him whether I should call the IRS to ask a question about my taxes. "I don't know," he said, "but what I always tell new musicians in the symphony is: don't speak to the conductor unless he speaks to you first."

At three weeks old, my parents traveled with me to the U.S. I was too new for a passport and had no other paperwork; I barely had a personality. Customs refused to let me enter—my parents needed to prove I was their child. My mother held my face up beside my father's. "Whose baby do you think this is?" she argued with the officer. "They look identical—there's no question this is our baby." The officer instructed my mother to go to a notary public upstairs at the airport to obtain documentation. The notary public did not require any identification—he took my mother's word that I was her child.

The protagonist (co-author?) of the U.S. passport book can be one of two genders. He or she is described as an object: height, color, place of origin. What is not explicit in the passport book is that the protagonist is alive. A cadaver (in whole or part) cannot cross the border with a passport book; it needs a death certificate. Exceptions: teeth, hair, fingernails, toenails, bones, bone fragments, and cremated remains all may be carried across the border with someone else's passport as luggage. A casket, with flowers,

may enter the country duty-free if accompanied by a corpse.

I have become fascinated by the planned ghost town in New Mexico called The Center for Innovation, Testing and Evaluation—or, simply, The Center. It would have all the features of a regular town, except for one—the people. Corporations could rent time and space to run tests on research projects that they could not test on real-live-towns. The idea was apparently inspired by Walt Disney World, in that the exterior spaces would appear real, and all of the laboratories and maintenance would be hidden behind the scenes or underground. For a year, I make notes, struggling to develop a story around The Center. I recall a challenge from an old teacher: write a story with no people in it, and no personification allowed. He already knew what would happen: we'd end up writing about fire, or a storm; it would be pretty boring; no longer than a page. Eventually, I read that the plan for the Center has been cancelled. Perhaps it is as difficult to create a town without people as a story without them.

As a child, I sustained an obsession with Biosphere 2, an artificial, closed-in ecosystem in Arizona. Biosphere 1 is Planet Earth. This project did include humans, who lived in the system for years at a time. I had a picture book about its missions, but most of what I remember from it is the recurring dreams I had where I edged up to the sealed glass limits, breathing in humid green and peering out of the fogged glass. There was some sort of comfort in imagining myself so clearly and specifically contained.

Sealand is an abandoned fortress in the sea off the coast of England that has been named its own nation by the family of residents that claimed it in 1967. It has issued its own passports, currency and flag, but in 1997, all passports were revoked due to a pandemic of false Sealand passports turning up worldwide.

The Vatican issues passports; the Pope's passport number is

always 1.

Foreign Policy outlines four simple steps for starting your own country. Step one: "You must have a defined territory. You must have a permanent population. You must have a government. Your government must be capable of interacting with other states."

What state of mind would I need to be in to start my own country? Perhaps it would be similar to the one needed for a face tattoo; directionless anger; thirst for individuality; pent-up frustration with no vent.

The final step, according to the magazine, is to send a letter requesting recognition to the following address:

Ban Ki-Moon
Secretary General
The United Nations
First Ave at 46th Street
New York, NY 10017
United States of America

Shortly after I moved back to Canada after seven years in the U.S., my friend Sam visited. We browsed through a list of screenings at the Toronto International Film Festival. I wanted to see one called *How to Start Your Own Country*. Sam laughed and said no. "Why not?" I asked. "Terrible title," he said. "That's a title for an instructional manual. I don't want a manual. I want a story."

This is a story about the passport.